



From Reset to Reboot?

Alexander Likhotal

President, Green Cross International;
Member, Board of Trustees, World Academy of Art & Science

Abstract

The Ukrainian crisis provoked a serious and dangerous deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. However the relations between Russia and the West should not be reduced to the current Ukrainian crisis. The rational interpretation requires getting rid of Cold war prejudices and facing the systemic dysfunctionality of the current international system routed in the failure to adjust it to post Cold war realities.

To “reboot” this dangerous system “freeze” it’s important to reformulate the international agenda and political frameworks to encourage transformative leadership. The new architecture should provide an integrated agenda for progress on security, energy, and economic cooperation as well as coordinated efforts to address frozen conflicts. And most urgently, joint and concerted efforts are needed to take Ukraine out of a condition of social and state breakdown, and turn it into a hub of cooperation rather than a prize drawn from East-West competition.

The Ukrainian crisis provoked a serious and dangerous deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. And a new “reset” will not help any more to improve the situation; we need a full system reboot to avert the revival of Cold War, arms race and other threats that are looming large, especially climate change, the growing shortage of fresh water, food shortages, international terrorism, cyber security, pandemics and so on.

Since there are many factors at play, it is very important now to take a sober and balanced look at the situation, to be conscious of the existence of both external and internal core reasons of the crisis.

At the global level, it is a symptom of the growing dysfunctionality of existing world order. This was triggered by a failure to adjust it to new realities after the end of the Cold War. The world has been pregnant with the new order (both leaders Bush and Gorbachev paid a lot of attention to this issue). However, these plans have been archived by the West which was carried away by the “victory euphoria” after the end of the Cold War. Pope John Paul II warned in 1992 that “the Western countries run the risk of seeing this collapse of Communism as a one-sided victory of their own economic system, and thereby failing to make necessary corrections in that system.”

Unfortunately, after 25 wasted years, his prediction did come true as the global crisis of 2008-2009 triggered the transition to a different historical period. In essence, it clearly

revealed that the world's development has reached a point where the degree of interdependence between nations is out-of-sync with the world's capacity for coordination.

This asymmetry has put in front of the world a choice between two ways of balance restoration.

The first option is to strengthen the interdependence. This was what the G20 proposed in 2009, but failed to implement.

The second option is to reduce interdependence – give way to “de-globalization”. The world's development has, unfortunately, been sliding towards the second scenario.

When peaceful change is not possible, violent transformation becomes inevitable. Russia routinely and arrogantly has started to exploit the vulnerabilities that have opened up the following mistakes and miscalculations by all sides over the past 20 years. China has done the same in its relations with Japan, as has Iran – on the nuclear issues, and the religious radicals all over the world.

And it is not surprising that at such times the “upper hand” would go not to those who play best by the rules, but to those who seize the right moment to reject the rules, impose new rules and, when needed, renounce those new rules as well.

Ukraine is clearly one of the victims of this process. Located on the border of two geopolitical entities, the country is being torn apart by “deglobalisation”. This is why there are no diplomatic “quid pro quo” solutions at hand now. All the goodwill in the world will not bring together two major geopolitical entities compelled to protect their interests in ways that must necessarily make the other feel threatened.

From the Russian perspective, NATO expansion has always been seen as treachery – a direct violation of both overt and covert agreements reached with the West at the end of the Cold War. Russia has already had to silently swallow two waves of NATO enlargement. But the possibility of NATO expansion to Ukraine – the soft underbelly of Russia's perceived security zone – especially after the 2008 NATO Bucharest Declaration practically extending invitation to Georgia and Ukraine to join the Alliance, was seen almost as a reason for a big war starting.

However, Putin is not just seeking Western concessions on Ukraine. Ukraine is, in fact, only a convenient space in which to apply a new “Russian world” strategy. Certainly, Russia has local tactical aims in Ukraine – relative autonomy for the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, reliable life support systems for Crimea and Transnistria, and a guarantee that Ukraine's political choices do not undermine Russia's security. But these are only bargaining chips in the pursuit of the real prize – recognition of Russia as the true and lawful successor to the USSR's superpower status. In Putin's eyes, only this will crown him appropriately – and extend his presidency beyond any electoral horizon.

Global forces are also clearly exacerbated by an inherent Ukrainian problem. Alexander Solzhenitsyn prophetically remarked in his memoirs, which he wrote in exile long before the

fall of the Soviet Union, that the “Ukrainian question is one of the most dangerous issues of our future... the minds on both sides are not well prepared for it.” He continued: “As it is useless to tell Ukrainians that we all descended, by birth and spiritually, from Kiev, and it is just as useless to expect Russians to recognize the fact that people beyond the Dnieper River are different. And it is the Bolsheviks who were responsible for many of the wounds and much of the discord.” The writer feared that it would be “too difficult to have a reasonable conversation.”

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Solzhenitsyn accurately pointed out the key problem: the conflict of identity that has been translated, after Ukraine’s independence, into two distinctly different development models – one westward looking and nationalistic-monocultural and the other eastward oriented and multicultural.

More than any other change of government in Kiev since 1991, the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich last year brought the triumph of the nationalistic perspective, held most strongly in western Ukraine, whose leaders were determined this time to ensure the winner takes all, decoupling the country from its historic links with Russia.

Against this background, the West’s support of the Maidan, the overthrow of Yanukovich served as the trigger for Russian preemptive strike, designed from Russian perspective to prevent a much larger disaster.

The West might have even yielded on Ukrainian agenda, if Russia’s claims did not stretch beyond keeping Ukraine in its orbit. But the West understands that the surrender of Ukraine would mean a return to the post-war system that emerged in 1945 and was dismantled with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

But we are not necessarily condemned to a new round of global confrontation. A number of things can and should be done to reverse the dangerous trends and prevent a new division of Europe and the world.

Globally the “rules of the game” must be changed to make escalation impossible. It’s important to reformulate the international agenda and political frameworks to encourage transformative leadership. The world must stop succumbing to “baby-sitter syndrome,” where the most attention always goes to wherever the most noise is coming from. Current governance and international institutions should be upgraded fast enough to harness and channel change, instead of being overwhelmed by it.

Within Europe, the crisis can be re-scaled by working out a common goal of long-term co-development. It must be acknowledged that Europe today is not the center of the world. Its problems are part of a complex global system, where all are affected by all. Perhaps, as once the United States and Canada were made part of the European process, it's time to think about turning the European process into a Eurasian one.

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It is time also to stop basing strategic thinking on Tom Clancy's novels. Peace is not a zero sum game. Security crisis is always rooted in perceptions and cannot be resolved by military means. War does not determine who is right – only who is left.

Put simply, setting up a public duel is a bad way to solve a crisis. The West's views of Russia today are outdated and need to be corrected. Such a correction will be nearly impossible, however, so long as Russia itself keeps believing its own propaganda and fails to define and articulate its long-term interests.

For its part, Ukraine should abandon delusions about its future. Ukraine won a historical chance of becoming a true European nation, but in order to accomplish it needs strong political will instead of populist decisions, commitment of the people and determination of political elites. Europe can be a babysitter but not a breast-feeding mother in this process.

Besides, Europe is not anxious at all to bring Ukraine into the EU at the time of mounting economic difficulties. Accepting Ukraine into NATO today would be a worst nightmare for the alliance. And no one is going to fight for Ukraine. History and geography bind it for better or worse to be a neighbor of Russia. This is not in fact limiting its political choices, but rather enhances them. As the Russian/Ukrainian saying goes, “a gentle calf sucks two cows”.

The smartest option for the country would be to focus on domestic transformation – economy, social sphere, politics and a new constitution. Donetsk and Lugansk, as well as Crimea, could be declared temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories, along with assurances that there are no plans to reclaim them by military force. A reliable defense of the new disengagement line should be organized, with international peacekeepers, to push responsibility for social and economic development where it now belongs: the separatists and the occupational forces. In parallel, cultural autonomy (language, schools, regional tax systems, etc.) should be provisioned for regions that will come back or be returned or reclaimed in the future.

But it is most important that the new architecture should provide an integrated agenda for progress on security, energy, and economic cooperation as well as coordinated efforts to address frozen conflicts. And most urgently, joint and concerted efforts are needed to take Ukraine out of a condition of social and state breakdown, and turn it into a hub of cooperation rather than a prize drawn from East-West competition.

Author Contact Information

Email: alexander.likhotal@gci.ch